

Refuses to quit

Lincoln woman educates others about prevention of AIDS

Editor's note: To protect to the privacy of the woman in this story, her name has been changed.

By Cindy Kimbrough

She is surrounded by clowns. Clowns sit on shelves and hang on the walls. Some are happy, some sad. One clown pops out of a drum. It was gift from a friend. A clown on the wall leads a duck by a leash. There is a numbing brightness to the room — bright mauve walls spotted with bright tropical posters. It forms a brilliant environment for the clowns. She reflects the brightness . . . a neon green, pink and orange outfit . . . bright pink lipstick.



Everything about the tiny robust woman seems bright and happy. Everything, that is, except her future. Two years ago Martha learned she was HIV positive.

Now she is struggling to put herself together and live out the life she has left. Martha sits up straight and begins her story. It all started in 1988, she says, when she went into treatment for alcoholism. She drank a lot and did some drugs, but never intravenously. "I made some bad choices," she says, but had decided to take charge of her life. During the time she was in treatment she learned a lot about AIDS and the HIV virus, but she thought little about it. Then in 1990 she sponsored a woman in the alcohol treatment program. The two became close friends, Martha serving as the mentor. While helping her friend get through treatment, she heard the whole AIDS story again.

On a whim, the two women decided to get tested. Martha was getting divorced and trying to recover from the destructive relationship.

"I thought I would get tested so I'd know for the next relationship I'd go into that everything would be okay . . ." she says.

At age 32 she planned to go back to college and get her life back on the straight and narrow.

She would get tested and this would be one area she wouldn't have to worry about.

"I didn't even think about it after I had the blood count — I just thought it could never happen," she says.

Understandably, she wasn't prepared when she received the call at work. The test had come up positive, the doctor told her.

"My first thought was that I was going to die . . . and soon," she says.

"I was in complete denial. I was tested again. I knew they had made a mistake."

But the test came up positive again. She went through disbelief, shock, anger, denial, frustration, fear.

For six months to a year she says she was like a crazy woman. Her life seemed ended. She was severely depressed.

She quit her job. She couldn't get any insurance.

Martha says she, like most people with the virus, went from being somewhat successful with a good job, to being forced to live in poverty, just getting by.

She returned to college but questioned why. Who would hire her?

She considered going back to drinking.

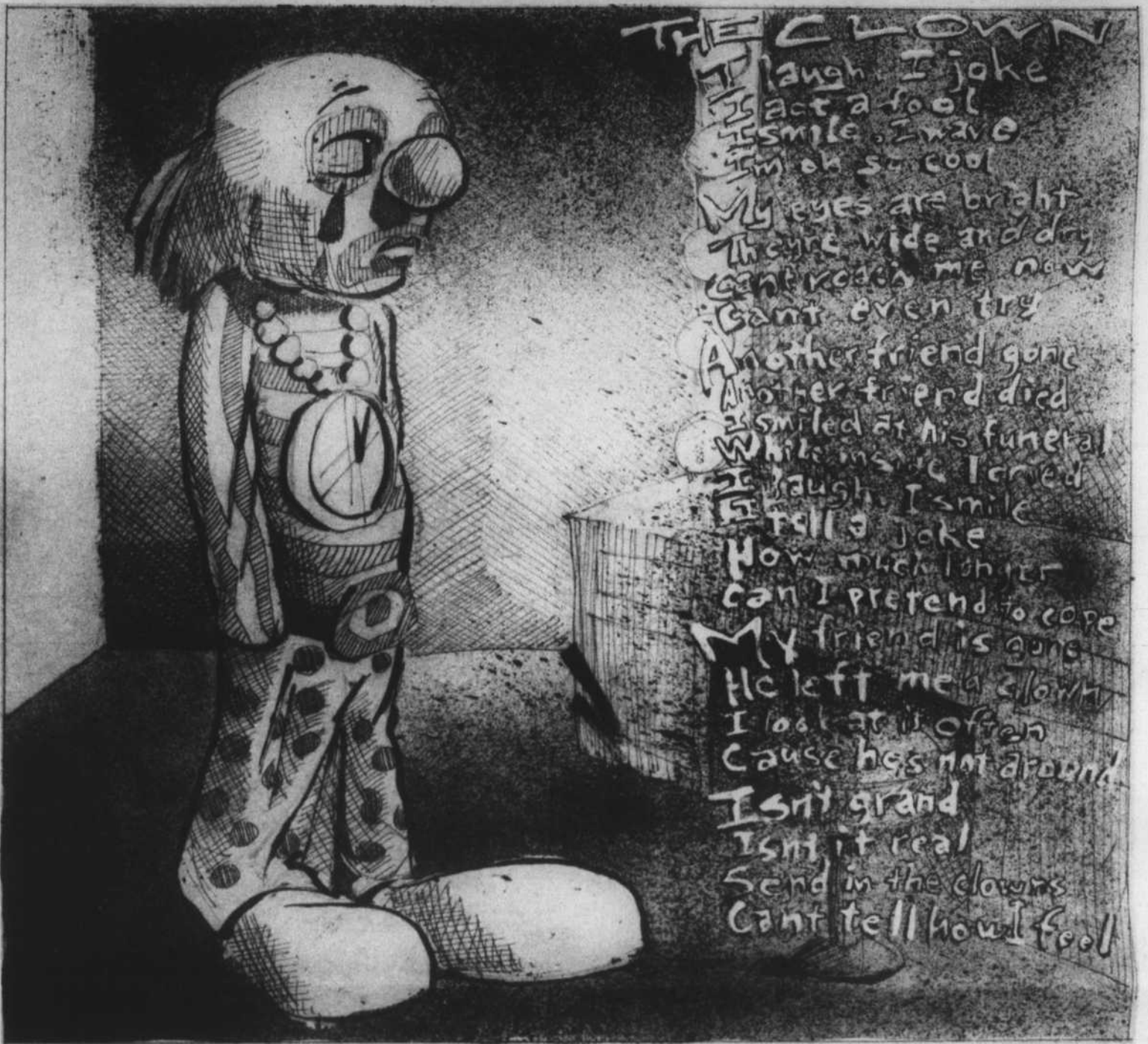
"As an addict knowing that you are going to die soon, you think you might as well drink."

And to this day — over the last two years — she still has moments when she can't accept the reality of her situation.

"Even now I want to get tested again. . . . It has to be a mistake."

Physically, Martha says, she feels healthy. Her T-4-cell count is normal — between 1,000 and 1,500. The T-4-cells help the body defend against infection. But she gets tired easier now. She can't get through the day without taking a nap with her overprotective Stratford terrier, Henry.

Eating has become her new addiction, she says. It's harmful to her because she has diabetes, and she's put on a lot of



David Badders/DN

weight. But she says she's not concerned about that. She's seen her friends waste away down to 80 and 90 pounds.

"I keep thinking as long as I'm fat, I'm healthy."

Martha says she tries to keep the rest of herself together by attending an AIDS/HIV support group.

"The support group probably saved my sanity."

The group provides a social network, she says. Those in the group know everything involved with the disease. They know what to do and what drugs to try.

"I have found some of the most loving people and the most caring people in my support group, even more so than my family."

But that closeness has made her situation worse, or at least more painful.

Out of the original support group she entered two years ago, no one remains. She's seen her friends slowly die and witnessed the pain they had to go through.

Martha went to eight funerals last year.

She keeps the funeral programs in a little basket by her bed.

"I find it helps the grieving process."

She says it also helps to talk about her situation.

Born and raised in Nebraska, Martha talks at schools around the state. She has spoken to parent groups and has even addressed an auditorium full of college-age women.

"If you've never done any public speaking before and then step on a stage in front of hundreds of people, it's very hard."

She knows the minute she steps on stage, she will be judged, stereotyped.

"If you have AIDS or the HIV virus you're either an intravenous drug user or a slut."

But it's worth it, her mission to educate people — especially young women. It could happen to them.

Unlike most people, Martha says, she knows how she was infected. Her ex-husband infected her.

But, to this day, he refuses to be tested, she adds bitterly. As long as he puts off taking the test, she says, he can avoid the truth.

Monogamy, she says, does not ensure you are safe.

If it happened to her, it can happen to anyone.

And Martha says she speaks out because she is disgusted at how long the disease was ignored and how ignorant people still are about the ways of getting the disease.

It's crazy how people are so unknowledgeable about an epidemic that has been going on for 12 years, she says.

It's crazy how people are still willing to go out on Saturday night and have unprotected sex, yet worry about getting the virus through a mosquito bite.

It's crazy how former President Reagan didn't mention the word AIDS for seven years into the epidemic, she says.

And, she says, it's crazy that people don't realize that the disease is almost 100 percent preventable. Condoms, she says, have proven to be 99.8 percent effective.

So she continues to get up in front of people, to sing the praises of condoms.

But she admits she doesn't just do it to help society. She does it to help herself.

"I just don't want to be another number or another person who dies of AIDS. I want something positive to happen out of what happened to me. When I die I want there to be a reason for me being here."

"The most important thing to me is that I mattered to someone, I helped someone or I prevented someone else from going through what I had to go through, whether it was alcoholism or drug addiction or HIV."

But even though Martha is willing to stand up in front of hundreds of people and tell her story, she doesn't confide in everyone that she is HIV positive.

Unless she knows the person can handle the news and will support her, she will not take them into her confidence.

"I've made that mistake before and have ended up supporting the other person," she says.

She doesn't need that, Martha says. Life's too short.

But she has told her family.

Her older sister is very supportive. She's her closest friend, Martha says. She now lives with Martha and supports her. Martha says she couldn't have survived without her sister.

It is difficult for the rest of her family, she says, because she does not yet have AIDS, she still only has the HIV virus.

They are in denial, she says.

Martha says she wishes they would deal with it now.

"I wish they would talk about it. I wish they would be supportive. I wish they would say, 'How are your feeling? How was your visit to the doctor? How was your blood count?'"

"I wish they'd do anything besides never mentioning it . . . never talking about it."

Martha says it has been particularly difficult for her mother. That's the last thing a mother wants to think about — burying one of her children.

And Martha says she won't chance having her own children.

But she would take the chance with another relationship.

"People think that if somebody's HIV positive they should go lay down and die. I still, hopefully, have a lot of years left to live."

"I'm a caring person. I'm a loving person. I know that I have a lot to give in a relationship."

Martha says all she is asking a man to do is to wear a condom, something she doesn't think is unreasonable.

"Most men wouldn't think of having a relationship with me, but they would go out and have unprotected sex."

That in itself is unreasonable, she says. Martha says, as her eyes begin to cloud, that she has always had someone to love and she misses that.

"And there's something I have in my mind about dying . . . you feel like you need someone there to hold your hand." ◆